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Rangoon killers hired to sabotage protests

Rangoon (UPI, AP) — A gang of about 500 mercenaries hired to sabotage "the campaign for democracy" in Burma were promised rewards up to \$1,400 for each student leader they killed, newspaper reports said last night.

The gang of about 500 people on Sunday night looted a government-owned plywood production plant and a privately-owned biscuit factory in the eastern Rangoon suburb of South Okkalapa, newspaper reports said.

Buddhist monks and students from the local "Peace Preservation Committee" rushed to the scene to restore order but the gang resisted with swords, clubs, slingshots and pointed iron rods, reports said.

Four monks and two students disappeared in the conflict and 12 others were subsequently captured by the gang.

About 1,000 monks, students and members of the local fire brigade rushed to rescue the students, besieging the two factories and demanding the return of the captured monks and students.

The gang fled into nearby living quarters for retired military men, who helped the fleeing gang

by attacking their pursuers with an assortment of weapons, wounding many, reports said.

Battles raged all night and resulted in 36 of the mercenaries being captured and eight others killed.

Three monks and two students are missing and presumed murdered by the saboteurs, reports said.

The captured mercenaries confessed they were hired for the mission by "elements opposed to the campaign for democracy" and said they had been promised 10,000 kyats (\$1,400) and 5,000 kyats (\$700) respectively for each student leader or student killed, the reports said.

Newspapers carried uncaptioned pictures of beheaded men that were apparently murdered by the mercenaries.

Burmese and diplomatic sources said an ultimatum for a nationwide general strike if the one-

party government refuses to resign appeared to have wide backing, despite fears the regime would make a last, violent effort to retain power.

The battles on Sunday night appeared to be the first example of the violence the regime was expected to use in its attempts to regain the iron grip on the people it once enjoyed.

Even the employees of the ruling party headquarters in Rangoon called for an end to the one-party system and announced they would refuse to serve party officials at an emergency party congress set for September 12.

"We are the people who have suffered at close quarters the evils of the one-party system," the employees said in a statement given to UPI yesterday.

Meanwhile all 187 foreign ministry employees who belonged to the rul-

ing party resigned their membership, and 16 of Burma's 26 foreign diplomatic missions have voiced opposition to the party, ministry sources said yesterday.

A statement from ministry employees said the group decided at a meeting on Monday to resign from the Burma Socialist Programme Party, which protesters blame for 26 years of harsh repression and ruinous economic policies.

Ministry sources said employees at 16 foreign missions, except the ambassadors, have supported demands for formation of an interim government to lead the transition to democracy.

The statement appealed for support from foreign missions and said: "We have now reached a stage where the government should comply forth with with the people's wishes. Any responsible government would have done so long ago.

Many other government departments have expressed opposition to the government through

public statements, strikes and street demonstrations. This has crippled President Maung

Maung's administration, which faces nationwide mass demonstrations tomorrow if it does not yield to demands for an interim government.

Lawlessness spread to the capital centre yesterday as hundreds of looters stripped three government warehouses with no interference from authorities.

Sources said hundreds of people carried away bags of rice from a warehouse in Ahlone, in the western part of the city. In brisk business near the warehouse, they sold the rice to merchants for 100 kyats (about \$1.7) per 75-kilogramme (165-pound) bag.

Student and opposition political leaders have announced that unless the government resigns by 8:00 p.m. tonight, they will begin a general strike to shut down all economic and government activity until the regime resigns and holds free elections.

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